

Old Age

The onset of old age, at the conclusion of adulthood, is no easy border to landmark. Symptoms abound on either side of the line, forecasts and reminiscences of times of youth.

You can still, at sixty five, cut a track through the Georgia pine woods, build a camp there for the night and return to the house in the morning, fresh enough for a full day at the office. On the other hand you can't recall your Mom's birthdate or the date of the Battle of Hastings, with a discussion of which you begin every semester of lecturing. By a slow accumulation you discover an accretion of evidence for aging. Say between sixty-five and seventy five. You are finishing up decades of writing, griping at a publisher who should know you better, rereading your old Reader, only to discover never before seen typos. A couple of years of this stage, it might be said, open up a period in which you find yourself increasingly prone to errors in daily life, to which in the past you would never have been susceptible. The worst of these errors, of course, were of the most improbable sort, like striding around the house looking for your glasses which were in fact attached to your nose.

Old age just goes on and on, and in fact the fireworks, which indeed promised themselves some time before in Dylan Thomas' lyric —'Do not go gently into that good night'— seem indefinitely postponed. What indeed is that 'good night' except a succession of prescriptions, doctor visits, and eye exams? The answer comes onto you as tediously as does the list itself. The answer is that you need to 'burn gently with a hard gemlike flame,' as Walter Pater suggests, careful and adversarial, and not bother to 'rage against the night,' as Dylan puts it in his fiery Irish way.